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# WANDERING MINDS, STAGED DISCOVERIES: EXPLORING INDIRECT AND DIRECT RESEARCH IN DRAMATURGY, DESIGN, AND LIBRARY INSTRUCTION

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This article provides an examination and application of the methodologies employed in dramatic arts-centered research, categorizing them into two primary dramaturgical approaches: direct and indirect. The direct research approach involves mining a theatrical text (words, structures, patterns, etc.) and its context (historical, cultural, social, etc.). In contrast, the indirect research approach invites association and synthesis, making imaginative, subjective, and intuitive connections that offer insights into broader patterns and enhance understanding of a work and its realization on the stage. Direct and indirect research methods are applicable across dramaturgical disciplines, but for this article, these methodologies are explored through their application in coursework for theatrical costume design. The integration of the two methodologies makes for not only well-informed artistic choices, but also for creative and, possibly, innovative ones. Finally, the article discusses the evolving role of librarians and libraries in shaping and facilitating both direct and indirect research. Direct research methodologies can be supported through many library instruction practices, such as primary source and visual literacies, while indirect research can be supported through encouraging synthetic and divergent thinking about library resources and encouraging exploration of library collections.

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Ultimately, this exploration contributes to the ongoing discourse on dramaturgic research methodology, encouraging a nuanced and adaptive approach to research in a creative landscape, and the ways that libraries and librarians can support creative research methods.

**Keywords:** dramaturgy; costume design; library instruction; creative research

## Introduction

The research methods that are used in a discipline are closely tied to the kinds of information that are needed to support those methods and questions. Economists need datasets to run statistical models, historians need primary sources to come to new insights about an era, and anthropologists need to be able to observe human behavior in their environments. Researchers in all disciplines also need to be familiar with the body of scholarly literature that provides a framework and dialogue for their respective analyses. This knowledge base structures how researchers search for and evaluate information in their lives, including through resources provided by libraries. Artists, however, have varied information needs to support their creative research, and theater creatives are no exception. This article will explore research methods in dramaturgically based disciplines, including costume design, and will tie those research methods to ways that libraries can support the information and research needs of creative practitioners in these fields, particularly through instruction. Principally it will explore two different modes of research in dramaturgy: direct and indirect research, prioritizing ways that students can engage with the idea of research for creative expression. After a brief overview of these methods of research, we will illustrate how they apply to the specific field of costume design through one extended case study. Finally, we will discuss how these research methods can inform library instruction through various learning activities, drawing on activities used to support students in theatrical design courses. It is our hope that this article will open a discussion on research methods in the creative and theatrical arts, allowing a closer dialogue between dramaturgs, designers, and librarians.

## Definitions

Research methodologies across multiple disciplines—from the social sciences to medicine—have been broadly classified into two categories: “quantitative” and “qualitative.” Briefly, quantitative research is the collection and objective analysis of data, while qualitative research is an exploratory approach that relies

on subjective inquiry.<sup>1</sup> Another pair of more vernacular labels, analogous to the quantitative and qualitative, are “hard” and “soft.” “Hard” (and its analogue “quantitative”) research is often perceived as being more rigorous, objective, and scientific, while “soft” research (or “qualitative”) is seen as more subjective, speculative, and less rigorous.<sup>2</sup> These connotations undervalue the importance and validity of qualitative research methods. For dramaturgical purposes, the terms “hard” and “soft” research are not only imprecise but can also perpetuate outdated stereotypes about the nature of inquiry.<sup>3</sup>

Using more descriptive labels such as “direct” and “indirect” helps to clarify the nature of the research methods without implying a hierarchy of validity. In dramaturgical terms, direct research is that which has a direct connection to the text/project—still fact-based and objective—and indirect research is that which has an indirect relationship—synthetic, subjective and at times intuitive—to a given text. This binary approach has assisted student-artists in building a more rigorous, expansive, and diversified research discipline.<sup>4</sup> Both direct and indirect approaches have distinct characteristics and applications, making them suitable for different artistic objectives.<sup>5</sup> Admittedly, in artistic research, they must be used as metaphorical tools. Most importantly for the artist, it is the intersection and synthesis of direct and indirect research methodologies that can lead to more comprehensive insights and innovative work.<sup>6</sup>

### *Direct Research*

Direct research is here defined by its focus on quantifiable observation and information that provides precise evidence that can be analyzed and interpreted. A level of objectivity is presupposed. When applied to the arts, direct research may

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1. Dvora Yanow, “Thinking Interpretively: Philosophical Presuppositions and the Human Sciences,” in *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, ed. by Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), 5–26.

2. Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie, “On Becoming a Bi-Researcher: The Importance of Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methodologies,” paper presentation, the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Advancement of Educational Research, Ponte Vedra, FL, November 19, 2000, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED448201>.

3. Ibid.

4. Michael R. Jackson, “Resistance to Qual/Quant Parity: Why the ‘Paradigm’ Discussion Can’t Be Avoided,” *Qualitative Psychology* 2, no. 2 (2015): 181–198, <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000031>

5. Kelli J. Kerry-Moran, “Between Scholarship and Art: Dramaturgy and Quality in Arts Related Research,” in *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues*, ed. J. Gary Knowles and Ardra L. Cole, 1st ed. (Los Angeles, [Calif.]: SAGE, 2008), 493–502.

6. Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie, “On Becoming a Bi-Researcher: The Importance of Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methodologies,” paper presentation, the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Advancement of Educational Research, Ponte Vedra, FL, November 19, 2000, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED448201>.

seem atypical, as the arts are commonly associated with creativity, subjective interpretation, and qualitative evaluation. However, integrating direct research into the arts holds significant value that can enrich the work of the artist and improve an audience's appreciation of various forms. Direct research methods may include:

### *Text Analysis*

Examining and researching a text allows artist-researchers to gather specific, targeted information from a text on which to build their creative process and decision-making. Direct research in dramaturgical analysis can give an objective basis for interpretation and criticism. Artists can use direct research methods to support or challenge traditional interpretations of plays and explore the evolution of dramatic forms. For instance, Arthur Miller's careful use of language and dialogue — from rambling, fragmented patterns of speech to terse, clipped exchanges — in *Death of a Salesman* are vital details to investigate. Important too are the platitudes used by many characters. These platitudes and patterns should reveal a pervasive inability to separate reality from illusion and to understand another's perspective.

### *Historical Analysis*

Direct research can provide empirical insights into the historical patterns and the context of a given work. For example, quantitative analysis of archival data, economic factors, and social trends can help to clarify how and why a text was created and the factors that influenced its creation. Examination of data can uncover important insights about the context and forces that shaped a text. When looking at the text in *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry describes a cramped setting and staging for the Younger family's apartment, which illustrates the confining socioeconomic circumstances facing Black Americans in 1950s Chicago.

### *Cultural Inquiry*

Direct research can focus on the symbols, rituals, and practices that constitute a culture, concurrent with and independent of historical patterns and movements. This includes language, art, media, religious ceremonies, and social customs. A text is often a product of an individual mind, but one that is deeply embedded in a cultural context. By studying a cultural context, artist-researchers can illuminate meanings within a text shaped by cultural landscapes. It is important to recognize that cultures are not monolithic or static. They are constantly evolving through cross-cultural exchange and internal diversity. So, while direct research can illuminate key cultural elements, it should avoid essentializing or oversimplifying the culture depicted in the text. Culturally specific ele-

ments of the Russian aristocracy are inextricably imbedded into a play like *The Cherry Orchard* by Anton Chekhov. It is not just the historical moment that is being explored and represented, but the metahistorical — social rituals (class distinctions and interactions), cultural concepts (the significance of landownership) and cultural codes (gender norms) that undergird the text.

#### *Cross-Disciplinary Research*

The work of an artist can often intersect with other disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, and neuroscience. Direct research methods can help to explicate and deepen a text and its interrelatedness. By combining methods from various disciplines, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the creative process. Lucy Prebble's play *The Effect* explores the nature of love and the impact of antidepressants on the brain, making it essential for the production team to investigate the intersections between neuroscience, psychology, and our understanding of human emotions.

#### *Indirect Research*

Indirect research methods have their origins in the humanities and social sciences, which began to be formalized as distinct academic disciplines in the 19th century. These fields often emphasized interpretive methods and qualitative analysis, focusing on human behavior, culture, and subjective experiences. Indirect research emphasizes qualitative information and the implicit or synthetic understanding of complex concepts and connections.<sup>7</sup> It is more interpretive and methodologically flexible than direct research. Indirect research can offer a deep, nuanced understanding of complex questions. The interpretive nature of indirect research allows for a more flexible approach that can adapt to different social and cultural contexts. This adaptability is indispensable when dealing with diverse populations or in fields such as anthropology and sociology. Indirect research is often exploratory, leading to the development of new theories and concepts. This kind of innovation is crucial for the humanities, where evolving perspectives on culture, identity, and ethics play significant roles.<sup>8</sup> Examples of indirect research methods may include:

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7. Lynn Butler-Kisber, "Arts-Based Perspectives," in *Qualitative Inquiry: Thematic, Narrative and Arts-Based Perspectives*, 2nd edition (London: SAGE, 2018), 93–94.

8. Lynn Butler-Kisber et al., "Collage as Inquiry: Sensing, Doing, and Knowing in Qualitative Research," Paper Presentation, Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, QC, April 15, 2005.

*Conceptual Exploration*

Theatre artists often engage in reading philosophy, theory, or criticism not directly connected to a particular project or production to inform the conceptual underpinnings of their work. The writings of the philosopher Immanuel Kant are not directly referenced by playwright Friedrich Schiller in his play *Maria Stuart*, but a production of the play and its examination of the conflict between natural impulses and moral law are key themes in Kantian ethics. It would be valuable to an understanding of the intersection of private struggles and public morality presented in the play to see how it echoes Kant's emphasis on moral autonomy and duty.

*Engagement Approach*

Artist-researchers may engage in observational studies, spending time within environments or communities to absorb the dynamics that inform a given work. This might include taking field notes, sketching, and photographing, as well as informal interviews to capture the essence of the subjects. In 1898, the Russian director Konstantin Stanislavski mounted a production of *Tsar Fyodor Ivanovich* by Count Alexei Tolstoy, set in Russia during the turbulent late 16<sup>th</sup> century, for the newly created Moscow Art Theater. Stanislavski and a large portion of his company took a curated journey through ancient towns referenced in the play that culminated in a visit to the kremlin of Ivan the Terrible and its environs. This trip influenced the ultimate production of the play in multiple ways.

*Personal Reflection*

Introspection and journaling help artists to explore their own experiences, emotions, and responses as integral components of their creative process. Developing and refining ideas through brainstorming, mind-mapping, and writing can be a part of this process. This can involve exploring personal memories, dreams, or theoretical concepts that might inform the thematic and conceptual development of an artwork. In a production of Chikamatsu Monzaemon's play *The Love Suicides of Sonezaki* it would be advisable to not only research the social and cultural norms of Edo-period Japan, but to reflect on the creative team's personal perspectives on love, obsession, and the human psyche's capacity for self-destruction.

*Dialogues and Collaborations*

Participating in discussions with other artists, critics, and thinkers can provide new insights and perspectives that challenge and refine an artist's conceptual approaches. Collaborations, whether in formal settings (such as workshops) or informally, are also vital for cross-pollination of ideas. In a production of José Rivera's play *Cloud Tectonics* at the



Gloucester Stage Company in 2018, the company collaborated with the Peruvian American composer Anaís Azul, providing improvised music, rhythms and spoken word poetry to complement and enhance the play's dreamlike and metaphysical themes.

### *Integrative Research*

The distinction between direct and indirect methodologies is obviously slippery and imprecise. This binary approach, if understood as anything but a helpful image, can fail to capture the fluid and overlapping nature of artistic research. Progress often relies on the integration of different perspectives. Dualist thinking can obstruct this integration, making it challenging to develop approaches that leverage the strengths of both sides.

That said, while direct and indirect research methods are used independently, they are often more powerful when combined. Using both methods can compensate for the limitations of each. A multimodal approach allows an artist to explore different dimensions of an artistic work, from its socio-cultural impact and historical context to its psychological effects and aesthetic qualities.<sup>9</sup> Integrative research in the arts seeks to synthesize various theoretical frameworks and concepts from different disciplines to develop a more holistic understanding of the work. For example, this might involve merging concepts from art theory, cultural studies, and media studies to analyze a contemporary multimedia theatrical project. This integrated approach not only enriches the research, it also empowers practitioners to engage more deeply with the complexities of a subject. By embracing both the empirical rigor of direct research and the nuanced insights of indirect research, an integrative approach offers a powerful framework for exploring and creating.

### **Integrative Approaches: *The Little Green Birdie***

To better understand how these methodologies can be applied in practice, consider the 2022 production at Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University of *The Little Green Birdie*, translated by Christopher Cartmill and Enrico Picelli, based on the 18th-century Italian comedy by Carlo Gozzi. This example demonstrates how combining direct and indirect research approaches enhanced this production through both the creative process and the depth of the resulting artistic work. This example highlights how the creative teams utilized a

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9. Onwuegbuzie, "Becoming a Bi-Researcher: The Importance of Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methodologies."

multimodal approach to foster synthetic thinking and enhance creative problem-solving throughout the order of process.

### *Direct Research Strategies*

#### Text Analysis: Dramaturgical Insights from the Script

This fantastical comedic satire critiqued Enlightenment philosophy, highlighting the dangers of self-love and the consequences of forsaking traditional values and wisdom. Through a deep examination of the script, the design team gathered specific dramaturgical insights, laying the groundwork for interpretation. They validated and questioned conventional interpretations and investigated various dramatic styles. Additionally, script analysis helped to identify motifs, emotions, and repeated phrases. The student designers and their teams found many themes to expand upon, including transformation and identity, fantasy and reality, love and relationships, fate and destiny.

#### Cultural Inquiry: Exploring Italian Art and Traditions

The costume team found ways of looking at various aspects of Italian culture to deepen understanding and thus the nuances of character development. The team studied the historical impact of *Commedia dell'arte*, including themes, characters, and performance styles. They examined how trade, conquest, and diplomacy influenced Italian culture. By exploring major Italian artists and art movements, they aimed to understand the evolution of Italian artistic expression. Investigating regional music and dance helped them to consider the expression of local identities and cultural heritage. They also investigated the influence of the Catholic church on Italian culture, including its impact on art, politics, and on daily life. Research into traditional Italian festivals and local patron saint days provided insights into their historical roots and contemporary significance. Studying the history and development of Standard Italian and regional dialects reflected local identities. Additionally, the team explored the role of Italian cinema, television, and contemporary media in shaping popular culture.

#### Historical Analysis: 18th-Century Theater and Carlo Gozzi

Designers sought to capture the essence of 18th-century Italian drama by drawing from primary and secondary sources to inform their design decisions. Their in-depth historical analysis aimed to fully comprehend the form of theater relevant to the production with an exploration of the historical perspective on 18th-century Italy. By delving into cultural, political, and social contexts, they provided a robust foundation for the design process. Examining other works by Carlo Gozzi, students gleaned insights into prevalent themes, styles, and conventions of the period. Additionally, they investigated the staging of original productions



during Gozzi's era, scrutinizing historical records, sketches, and descriptions of 18th-century Italian theaters. This examination encompassed architectural layouts, stage machinery, audience configurations, and conventions of set design, costume, lighting, and sound used in Gozzi's productions.

### Cross-Disciplinary Research: Iconography and Enlightenment Philosophies

The design teams undertook a cross-disciplinary investigation that blended symbolic, cultural, and sensory elements to inform their work. They explored the iconography and graphics of tarot cards, analyzing their symbolic meanings and cultural relevance. Additionally, they examined Voltaire's role in the Enlightenment, focusing on how his writings reflected and influenced the philosophical and cultural currents of his time.

### Cross-Disciplinary Research: Color Theory and Sensory Phenomena

The costume design team also delved into the neurological phenomena of chromesthesia and synesthesia, where sensory pathways cross to create vivid and atypical perceptual experiences. In costume design, these phenomena served as metaphors for crafting multi-sensory artistic expressions. By drawing on sensory inputs like music or words that evoke vivid colors, patterns, or textures, they explored how costume can enhance visual storytelling and create emotionally resonant experiences. Finally, their research included a study of color theory principles and their influence on human perception and emotions, spanning the 18th to the 21st century, to further refine their understanding of how color can shape narrative and emotional impact.

### *Indirect Research Strategies*

#### Conceptual Exploration

The integration of indirect research added complexity and nuance to the production. By blending historical fidelity and cultural analysis with broader, more abstract influences, the team was able to push creative boundaries. This synthesis created a production that not only respected its 18th-century Italian roots but also connected with modern audiences on a sensory, emotional, and intellectual level.

The design concept aimed to blend realism with fantastical elements, featuring costumes that exaggerated personalities and emphasized traits and roles. Meanwhile, lighting, video, and sound heightened the contrast between fantasy and reality, creating an immersive and colorful aesthetic. The director set the tone with a playful yet evocative challenge: "Show me how Skittles taste," using

the candy's vibrant hues as inspiration for the palette. Words like "big," "fun," "joyful," and "giddy" served as guiding beacons, providing a framework while leaving room for interpretation and even misinterpretation.

Misinterpretation proved to be a critical element in the creative process, adding unexpected layers of complexity and depth. Words such as "joyful" or "giddy" elicited varied emotional responses from the team, where one person might envision "fun" as bright and exuberant, while another saw it as chaotic or overwhelming. Even the interpretation of colors was subjective; a lively palette to one could feel garish to another. The director's vision of tasting color sparked visual interpretations from the designer, resulting in a dynamic interplay of ideas that enriched the design. Rather than hindering the process, misinterpretation opened doors to creative exploration. It encouraged the team to consider new possibilities, pushing the boundaries of their concepts. For instance, the word "colorful" inspired interpretations ranging from subtle pastels to bold explosions of hues, each adding a unique dimension to the evolving design.

## Dialogue and Collaboration: Practical Creativity and Design Exercises

To navigate divergences in interpretation, the director and costume designer relied on structured and continuous dialogue. Feedback sessions embraced ambiguity, allowing each team member to contribute their perspectives. One such exercise, the "Rack of Responses," involved the director and costume designer simultaneously pulling garments from a costume stock inventory. Their aim was to evoke immediate responses and intuitive gut reactions to color, disregarding the "what" of the garments and focusing solely on the "how" of the colors. By asking themselves, "How do these colors speak to me?" they shifted the emphasis toward the sensorial and emotional impact of colors. This approach created an intuitive dialogue between the team, fostering deeper understanding and alignment.

Another exercise involved listening to Italian music, which became a ritualistic part of their routine. The director curated a playlist that spanned all periods of Italian pop music, creating an immersive soundscape that set the mood and atmosphere of the production. This auditory exploration provided a world for the production to inhabit and thrive within, offering context and inspiration for design elements.

## Personal Reflection: Visual Collage Techniques

Introspection and journaling also played a key role in the process. Both the lead and assistant costume designers used visual collage journaling to reflect on personal experiences, emotions, and emerging ideas, weaving their insights seamlessly into the creative process. Interactive problem-solving, such as sketching

directly onto the script, further grounded their concepts, linking the abstract to the tangible.

### Feedback and Iteration in Design

The iterative feedback process celebrated diverse interpretations within the team, shaping a multi-layered production. By leveraging color theory, the team harmonized fantastical and realistic elements, crafting emotionally resonant designs.

### *Integrating Methodologies: From Research to Imagination*

This integrative design process resulted in a memorable theatrical experience. By combining direct and indirect research, designers accessed a visceral level of creativity, rooted in sensory engagement and emotional intelligence. Collaboration, curiosity, and innovative research culminated in a cohesive vision that honored *The Little Green Birdie's* historical and cultural roots while resonating with modern audiences.

## Rethinking Research Priorities in Costume Design Education

In costume design, research is often perceived as a preliminary step, with students eager to move quickly into the design phase. However, when embraced as the foundation of creative conception, research transforms into a dynamic journey that inspires innovation and enriches narrative cohesion. It shifts from a task to complete to an exploration that connects designers with deeper themes and emotional layers of their work. As seen in the case study, a multidimensional approach of blending indirect, intuitive, and direct methods provides a framework for richer, more nuanced designs. For example, when designing costumes for a play set in the 1920s, a designer might use indirect research to examine the era's social norms, art movements, and technological advancements to establish a cultural and emotional context. Intuitive research might involve tactile and sensory explorations, such as feeling period fabrics, listening to jazz, or observing flapper-era dances. Direct research, including period fashion catalogs or tailoring manuals, ensures historical accuracy. Together, these methods turn costumes into vivid expressions of time, place, and character.

Prioritizing indirect and intuitive methods immerses designers in emotional and cultural landscapes before focusing on specifics. This approach expands creative horizons, enabling research that explores connections between dramatic and socio-political contexts. Drawing from interdisciplinary sources such as advertisements, botanical illustrations, or cookbooks helps designers to

capture the visual and cultural essence of a period while balancing authenticity with contemporary relevance. However, fear often hinders this process. Students may shy away from deep exploration, concerned about making mistakes or being judged, and instead gravitate toward safe, surface-level ideas.

Overcoming this fear requires reframing research as iterative and improvisational — valuing curiosity and experimentation over perfection. Educators play a vital role here, fostering environments that encourage creative risk-taking. By guiding students toward expansive research and helping them translate ideas into richly layered designs, educators nurture confidence and originality. This reimagined approach transforms costume design into a storytelling medium that engages audiences intellectually, emotionally, and sensorially, transcending traditional boundaries to become a powerful artistic practice.

### *Navigating the Interplay Between Fear, Inspiration, and the Creative Process*

Fear often shapes students' approach to costume design, particularly the belief that their ideas are finite. When tackling a script or project, they may rush to design characters' attire based on preconceptions shaped by prior productions, media portrayals, or limited exposure to fashion and art. After a single reading, they might assume they fully understand a character's development, skipping critical steps like script analysis or connecting the work to cultural, symbolic, or historical contexts. Costume design, however, is a process of examination, exploration, engagement, and envisioning. Skipping the examination and engagement phases—such as multiple script readings and thorough textual analysis—can stifle originality. Students often rely on online interpretations, sidelining their intuitive voice and failing to ask, *what does this project mean to me?* This overreliance on external critiques reflects a lack of confidence in their intellectual and creative vision, leading to a deferral of responsibility to the opinions of others. Fear of exploration often manifests as uncertainty: Where to start? What to look for? Even with compelling visual research, students may wonder how to interpret and personalize their findings. Should research serve as inspiration, or as a basis for historical reinterpretation? This hesitation underscores the importance of viewing research as a tool for discovery rather than a constraint.

Libraries offer fertile ground for improvisational thinking, yet many students find them intimidating. Here, librarians become invaluable collaborators, guiding students through unfamiliar resources and fostering a blend of intuitive inspiration and structured investigation. Costume design research transcends traditional boundaries, drawing from history, sociology, psychology, and visual arts to enrich the creative process. In an educational setting that values diverse

approaches, students learn to balance intuition with rigorous research, creating costumes that elevate narratives and deepen audience connections.

## **Library as Muse: Interweaving Disciplinary Insights for Theater Design**

Theatrical design students often feel intimidated by the library, uncertain of how to use the available programs and materials. A partnership with a librarian is essential for encouraging students to explore and access all types of materials, setting them up for success both academically and artistically. Research in costume design goes beyond traditional methods, incorporating diverse perspectives from history, sociology, psychology, and visual arts. Librarians play a crucial role in integrating indirect and direct research into theater design. They provide access to a wide range of resources, locate hard-to-find materials, and facilitate workshops, enhancing creative output and uncovering unique perspectives. This significantly aids design students by leveraging intuitive design principles, boosting their confidence and comfort in accessing materials, and making libraries more engaging and navigable. Together, librarians and theater designers create detailed, accurate, and captivating theater experiences, fostering a more informed and comprehensive creative process. This journey is supported by an educational environment that values diverse methods and perspectives, balancing intuitive inspiration with methodical investigation. This empowers designers to create costumes that elevate narratives and deepen audience connections.

### *Libraries and Direct and Indirect Research*

With an understanding of direct and indirect research as explored in this article, how can libraries and librarians support creative students and designers in a research process that encourages dramaturgical thinking? In working with students, librarians will want to consider not just the more obvious nature of direct research into a topic, but also to encourage students develop skills for divergent thinking with indirect research and to see libraries as tools for creative exploration. This section will explore the implications of direct and indirect research for library instruction with theatrical designers, but the principles discussed should be applicable to most dramaturgical disciplines.

The concepts of direct and indirect research discussed above add to a growing body of literature on ways that libraries can support creative research by students and faculty. The research on information needs of creative artists and of students in creative disciplines has developed over the past two decades, but

instructional activities to support these needs have been few and far between, especially in theater. In one of the only examples of research into theater and information literacy, Christina Dent devised an activity for theater students to bring a variety of sources together for dramaturgical research and presentation, utilizing the ACRL Information Literacy frame of “Scholarship as Conversation.”<sup>10</sup> In the activity, Dent had students read a summary of a play and then find sources on various facets of the play, including the author and the setting. Likewise, Diana Sachs and Michael Duffy reported on activities that had students first find and evaluate sources for accurate historical design of plays, and later engage with visual research that includes not just issues of historical accuracy but also “abstractions of topics” or images that invoke particular emotions.<sup>11</sup>

Most of the literature on the research needs of designers and dramaturgs stresses the need for direct research. Sara Jablon-Roberts and Eulanda Sanders report that for costume designers, research is one of four iterative strategies involved in making historically accurate costumes, with costume designers developing extensive research folders of images, texts, and physical items.<sup>12</sup> Historical accuracy is also the starting point for the instructional activities reported by Heather Dalal and Robin Shane, and they stress that primary sources and visual literacy are paramount for designers to ensure historical accuracy.<sup>13</sup> Michelle Hayford also focuses on the research and information literacy needs for culturally competent design, especially for productions that are set in a culture other than that of the designer.<sup>14</sup> Instruction in information literacy should certainly support the activities of creating historically accurate and culturally sensitive designs, but we must also acknowledge that library instruction can support indirect research through exploration and divergent thinking.

While much of the literature has focused on what we would term direct research for creative artists, researchers have also touched on what might be classified as indirect research, particularly in the realm of inspiration. For example, Ann Medaille found that “artists may find inspiration during the process

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10. Christina E. Dent, “Theater as a Conversation: Threshold Concepts in the Performing Arts,” in *Disciplinary Applications of Information Literacy Threshold Concepts*, ed. Samantha Godbey, Susan Wainscott, and Xan Goodman (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2017), 275–85.

11. Dianna E. Sachs and Michael J. Duffy, “Information Literacy Programming for Theatre and Dance Students at Western Michigan University,” *LOEX Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2017): 2–7.

12. Sara Jablon-Roberts and Eulanda Sanders, “A Theoretical Framework for the Creative Process of Theatrical Costume Design for Historically Set Productions,” *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 37, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 35–50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0887302X18796320>.

13. Heather A. Dalal and Robin I. Shane, “Taking the Stage: Theatre Design Students and Research,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 49, no. 6 (November 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2023.102795>.

14. Michelle Hayford, *Undergraduate Research in Theatre: A Guide for Students* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).



of searching for information, when they find an image, a fact, a story, a piece of music, or (most likely) an unspecified combination of all of the above.”<sup>15</sup> Appleton, Montero, and Jones report on supporting information literacy instruction for visual arts students by considering different learning styles, especially divergent thinking, which may look very different from traditional instructional activities that focus on producing a unique or correct answer.<sup>16</sup> Visual inspiration has also been the subject of much research in the visual arts, and the challenges of supporting visual inspiration research have been addressed by multiple studies that may be helpful in conceptualizing creative research.<sup>17</sup> However, in research on the information behavior and practices of creatives, there is little discussion of supporting both direct and indirect research as framed in this article.

### *Library Instruction Overview*

Keeping in mind the need for both direct and indirect research, the Music and Performing Arts Librarian at Rutgers has led several instructional activities with student designers in information literacy and in recognizing some of the ways that libraries might be engaged for dramaturgical research practices. Information literacy strategies, of course, are not limited to using libraries in information seeking practices, they also include understanding the complex landscape in which information is situated. The activities that students work on in these sessions reflect some of the practices that are reported by Sachs and Duffy (2017) and Dalal and Shane (2022), as many designers need to develop primary source literacy and visual literacy in their work with images. However, there are other

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15. Ann Medaille, “Creativity and Craft: The Information-seeking Behavior of Theatre Artists,” *Journal of Documentation* 66, no. 3 (January 1, 2010): 28–29, <https://doi.org/10.1108/00220411011038430>.

16. Leo Appleton, Gustavo Grandal Montero, and Abigail Jones, “Creative Approaches to Information Literacy for Creative Arts Students,” *Communications in Information Literacy* 11, no. 1 (July 2017): 147–67, <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2017.11.1.39>.

17. Helen Mason and Lyn Robinson, “The Information-related Behaviour of Emerging Artists and Designers: Inspiration and Guidance for New Practitioners,” *Journal of Documentation* 67, no. 1 (January 2011): 159–80, <https://doi.org/10.1108/00220411111105498>; Kylie Budge, “Virtual Studio Practices: Visual Artists, Social Media and Creativity,” *Journal of Science and Technology of the Arts* 5, no. 1 (2013): 15–23; Patrick Lo and Wilson Chu, “Information for Inspiration: Understanding Information-Seeking Behaviour and Library Usage of Students at the Hong Kong Design Institute,” *Australian Academic & Research Libraries* 46, no. 2 (June 2015): 101–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048623.2015.1019604>; Sarah Carter, Heather Koopmans, and Alice Whiteside, “Crossing the Studio Art Threshold: Information Literacy and Creative Populations,” *Communications in Information Literacy* 12, no. 1 (January 2018): 36–55, <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2018.12.1.4>; Tim Gorichanaz, “Understanding and Information in the Work of Visual Artists,” *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 71, no. 6 (2020): 685–95, <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.24286>; Tim Gorichanaz, “Art and Everyday Information Behavior: Sources of Understanding,” *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 55, no. 1 (2018): 143–50, <https://doi.org/10.1002/praz.2018.14505501016>.

practices that may support creative research in library instruction, especially in the under-theorized mode of indirect research. While these activities were developed through courses with design students, the suggestions are also applicable when working with multiple forms of dramaturgy.

### Indirect Research

As discussed above, indirect research, or supporting the exploration of thematic connections, is extremely important for designers and theater creatives, and should be supported in library instruction. Of the indirect modes identified, conceptual exploration and personal reflection are the most likely to be harnessed in a library session, though the library can also be imagined as a space for dialogue, collaboration, and engagement. One of the key instructional activities that can support indirect research is encouraging divergent thinking. Divergent thinking can be defined as thinking that explores various directions of thought—a behavior that is typical of creative artists—in addition to being one of the knowledge practices that librarians should cultivate according to the ACRL Information Literacy Framework.<sup>18</sup>

One activity that the Music and Performing Arts Librarian often includes in instruction sessions is word association and creating long lists of synonyms. For applications in both direct and indirect research, students must recognize that different researchers may use multiple terms to describe similar ideas or may have addressed a similar issue from a different perspective. Traditionally, listing synonyms can aid students in searching multiple terms through Boolean searching. However, by encouraging students to not just focus on synonyms but also word association, students can explore alternative pathways that may result in more expressive results and spur new research directions.

To encourage indirect research and divergent thinking, librarians can create activities to help students to follow their creative intuitions. One instructional activity can include creating a timed session for students to follow associated thoughts about a design element and then comparing different student solutions to the same prompt. For example, you can give students a similar design case, say a setting for a drawing room play, such as Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Time students in pairs to see who can go conceptually furthest while retaining the thread of the play, documenting their ideas (as potential keywords) during their reflections. Encourage students to keep their mind open to

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18. Mark A. Runco and Selcuk Acar, "Divergent Thinking," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Creativity*, ed. James C. Kaufman and Robert J. Sternberg, 2nd ed., Cambridge Handbooks in Psychology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 224–54, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316979839.013>; David Kolb, "Learning Styles and Disciplinary Differences," in *The Modern American College: Responding to the New Realities of Diverse Students and a Changing Society*, ed. Arthur W. Chickering and Nevitt Sanford (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981); Association of College and Research Libraries, "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education" (American Library Association, 2015), <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.

new associations as they research their selected topic, documenting new search terms and areas of research as they continue.

Just as there may be multiple potential associations with aspects of a play, there may be multiple possibilities for the use of items in a library. Another exercise for developing divergent thinking is to display a common item in the library and for students to imagine multiple ways the item may be used or ideas associated with it. Have students come up with as many actions or associations as possible for an item like a bookcase, which may include using the bookcase for storing books, for showing off your personality in the background of a Zoom meeting, for hiding a doorway to a hidden lair, or for serving as a makeshift ladder. Likewise, books and articles in the library may serve multiple purposes. A book like *Pioneers of Soviet Photography* (a random book chosen from the library's shelves) may be used to examine clothing worn, to inspire design based on artistic framing of technology in the photographs, to inform research on the field of photography (if it is the subject of the play), or to serve as a design element of a play itself if used on a coffee table, showing the character is worldly.

Browsing is another activity that can encourage divergent searching and support indirect research. Browsing has been a search method often (though not primarily) used by artists in the past, with the benefit of finding multiple and serendipitous sources on a topic.<sup>19</sup> Students are often not familiar with how libraries are organized, and how libraries can support browsing and serendipitous discovery. Various activities, such as a library tour and call number search activity can support browsing. For example, the Music and Performing Arts Librarian leads a library tour with highly curated items displayed along its route to spark student curiosity about the various kinds of items that are in a library's collection. The tour includes instruction on the Library of Congress call number system, which organizes the library's collections by various topics. Within these call number ranges, various visually stimulating items are displayed along the tour, for example an early-twentieth century Sears and Roebuck catalog (which often elicits gasps from several students) in the TS section for manufactures, manuals from the 1960s for making clothing and hairstyling in the TT section, fashion monographs and catalogs in the GT section, a book on Robert Wilson's stage productions in the PN section, and books on furniture and decorative arts from the Middle East in the ND section. In the bound periodicals, *American Fabrics* has actual fabric samples dating back to the 1940s and *Interiors* includes some mind-bending design elements from the 1970s.

Showing students a variety of types of resources and their potential for inspiration or contextualization can prime them to expand their search strategies or

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19. Mason and Robinson, "The Information-related Behaviour of Emerging Artists and Designers."

to embrace serendipitous discovery. Even before an ensuing discussion of the differences between primary and secondary sources in later information literacy sessions, students are aware of some of these unique materials in the library that may be utilized in their design careers. The library tour can spark interest that may alleviate some of the concerns about buy-in on the utility of libraries from creatives that Smyth, Moore, and Saylor identified.<sup>20</sup> At the end of the tour, students are given a brief call number guide, outlining ranges for fashion, art, theater, photography, manufactures, and handicrafts along with directions to locate a source in the library that is related to an artistic prompt or concept, such as African clothing or textiles, men's fashion, a Renaissance artist, or shoes. By pulling image-rich examples from the collections, librarians can encourage browsing in areas outside of theater, making connections for students with future design challenges. Another component can be added to this exercise by having students identify related concepts that are on nearby shelves, illustrating the need for divergent thinking and supplying synonyms for further searching.

These kinds of encounters in library tours and sessions need not be limited to visual items. Ideas for dramaturgy can be found in various forms of knowledge and inspiration as discussed in the sections above. However, visually stimulating resources provide quick examples when given a limited time to work with students.

## Direct Research

Just as indirect research can be supported through adapting familiar information literacy activities such as synonym searching, direct research can be supported through many activities that are familiar to librarians. A good starting point for emphasizing the need for secondary sources is to bring in the perspectives of professional designers, who view textual and contextual research as essential to their practice.<sup>21</sup> It is this scholarly research that will give context to designers' budding ideas and may inspire visual interpretations of ideas that they encounter, not just in the playscript, but in their research as well.

In working with student dramaturgs and designers, assisting students in navigating scholarship to provide historical analysis and cultural inquiry is paramount. However, in light of the above discussion on overreliance of direct research by student designers, librarians should be cautious in emphasizing research on previous *productions* of a play. Many database collections for theater highlight historic designs by prominent designers or for prominent pro-

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20. Laura Dimmit Smyth, Ian Moore, and Kodi Saylor, "'Looking for Pictures of Clouds': Defining the Unique Research Needs of Creative Communities," *College & Research Libraries* 83, no. 3 (May 2022): 393–415, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.83.3.393>.

21. A recommended pre-assigned reading is Jablon-Roberts and Sanders, "A Theoretical Framework for the Creative Process of Theatrical Costume Design for Historically Set Productions."

ductions. For example, The National Theatre Collection provides Suttirat Anne Larlarb's costume design sketches for the Royal National Theatre's 2011 production of *Frankenstein*, among other design sketches. While stunning examples of sketching, these designs may be prejudicial for students in creating their own designs, and instruction should focus more on the process of researching historical clothes or on developing the indirect research strategies for emotional communication discussed above, rather than finding examples from previous productions. While these collections are helpful for understanding the history of a play or of theatrical design, student designers are not principally historians and librarians should discuss with their design faculty whether these collections should be highlighted.

Primary sources are especially important for designers and dramaturgs, as they may provide ideas of how events in a play might have been experienced, including providing context for clothing designs and other production elements. In various instruction sessions with students at Rutgers, the differences between secondary and primary sources are discussed, emphasizing that primary sources "are materials in a variety of formats that serve as original evidence documenting a time period, an event, a work, people, or ideas."<sup>22</sup> For example, diaries and letters written by people who witnessed an event might be primary sources. To get the feeling of a period, media and popular culture from that period may also be primary sources. Primary sources may also be contextual, based on the kind of inquiry, as textbooks from a period may be used as primary sources to understand how a certain event was portrayed, even though they would be considered secondary sources about the actual information conveyed. When these are not at hand, you can have students imagine what kinds of primary sources they might find useful. For example, one student who was researching a design for the play *She Kills Monsters*, reflected that they would want to see a vintage *Dungeons & Dragons* guidebook for visual clues and inspiration. This allowed the librarian to work with the student to identify potential search terms and strategies, while demonstrating the reach of libraries through Interlibrary Loan.

Finding and evaluating primary sources with visual components can be a tricky task for researchers of all skill levels but is necessary to develop information literate designers. In finding period details, designers need to not only be aware that collections of garments, images of costumes, and primary sources about a period are available online, they also need to ask questions about the accuracy and the socio-cultural meanings of these items. As with many primary sources, students must be able to ask questions about the origin of the image,

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22. SAA-ACRL/RBMS Joint Task Force on the Development of Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy, "Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy" (Society of American Archivists, 2018), [https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/Guidelines%20for%20Primary%20Source%20Literacy\\_AsApproved062018\\_1.pdf](https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/Guidelines%20for%20Primary%20Source%20Literacy_AsApproved062018_1.pdf).



such as: When was it made? Who was the image intended for? Is the image idealized, such as in an advertisement? More and more primary source collections of clothing are becoming available online, with prominent examples including the Vintage Fashion Guild, the Commercial Pattern Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute Fashion Plates collection, and the Royal Victoria and Albert Museum Costume collection.<sup>23</sup> While these image-based collections provide basic metadata on their images, they do not include information about who would be wearing this clothing, and what the meaning of some of the designs would be. For that, these image resources must be combined with secondary research literature or with curated educational collections, such as those from Europeana or the Digital Public Library of America,<sup>24</sup> which aggregate images and secondary literature on thematic topics.

Outside of these curated collections, students are already discovering images and primary sources through image-heavy social media platforms, such as Pinterest and Instagram. Discussing the reasons that students use social media for artistic research can open information literacy debates on the benefits and drawbacks of these systems. In discussions with students in various courses, students will often answer that they like using these search tools because the algorithms have learned what they like. However, this can lead to a stifling of creativity and to examining images with an uncritical lens. As designer Jennifer Adams (2023) states, "When researching, often we unconsciously look for images that corroborate what we want to design. Think about how our own viewpoint, our lens, impacts our research and thus our designs. Are we questioning our research or just accepting what someone else wrote or documented?"<sup>25</sup> The ease of finding emotionally satisfying images online can lead to conversations about the purpose of searching for images. Drawing on the work of Safiya Noble, the librarian can also offer a brief demonstration of how image algorithms can distort or privilege what images are returned in a search.<sup>26</sup> For example, a Google image search for "white girls" returns images of almost all blonde women (in addition to many images of the 2004 film *White Chicks*). Students may be asked why this

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23. Vintage Fashion Guild, [vintagefashionguild.org](https://vintagefashionguild.org); the Commercial Pattern Archive, <https://copa.apps.uri.edu/>; The Metropolitan Museum's Art Costume Institute's Fashion Plates collection, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/libraries-and-research-centers/watson-digital-collections/costume-institute-collections/costume-institute-fashion-plates>; and the Royal Victoria and Albert Museum Costume collection, [https://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/costume?srsId=AfmBOopzwq14ofeBHpRbz3Lh9\\_t9zzZ5\\_KfGuEY\\_Af3yravuFOvjtI](https://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/costume?srsId=AfmBOopzwq14ofeBHpRbz3Lh9_t9zzZ5_KfGuEY_Af3yravuFOvjtI).

24. Europeana, <https://www.europeana.eu/en/collections>; Digital Public Library of America, <https://dp.la/>.

25. Jennifer Flitton Adams, *Teaching Costume Design and Costume Rendering: A Guide for Theatre and Performance Educators*, First edition. (Routledge, 2023), 8.

26. Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.18574/9781479833641>.



may be more prevalent in search results, especially with the knowledge that only a small percentage of white women in the United States have natural blonde hair, though many women in positions of power have blonde hair.<sup>27</sup> This may seem like an inane example, but it gets students to question the search engines and platforms that they use, how they get recommended sources, and further, how to ethically approach potential stereotypes in their communicative designs.

### *Integrative Research*

As was demonstrated in the research practices discussed in the production of *The Little Green Birdie*, there is not always a clear separation between direct and indirect research, and the order in which students engage in these modes may be flexible. A thematic idea may be stimulated through personal reflection or through community engagement, and then intensive research into that idea may occur through historical analysis. A student may want to engage with communities to inform their work but may want to do some preparatory research of their own before that engagement.

Navigating literacies around primary sources, visual sources, and secondary sources are complex activities, especially when trying to include more consideration of indirect research for students. Librarians should consider various ways that students may engage in research for different tasks or build on approaches through scaffolded exercises. At Rutgers, design students start with indirect research modes through the library tour and word association activities, with a brief demonstration of using the library's discovery layer. In the following semesters, they build on these skills by completing preliminary research for a production. For a brief portfolio, students are required to gather a primary source, an image, an academic article, and a news article, but are free to relate them to any aspect of their project, encouraging them to look beyond resources that are directly tied to the play. Students then need to verbalize why they chose these sources and how they would use them to inform their production. The goal is for students to be able to begin to synthesize multiple types of sources and research strategies into their design work; working and reporting in groups brings varying perspectives on research and creative intuition to the surface. These different source types encourage students to consider multiple research modes in direct and indirect research to investigate their analysis of the play, the setting in which they would put it, and potentially information on how the play was created.

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27. Christina Cauterucci, "Researchers Find That Female CEOs and Senators Are Disproportionately Blond," *Slate*, August 25, 2016, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2016/08/why-are-female-ceos-and-senators-disproportionately-blond-blame-sexism.html>.

## Conclusion

In higher education, educational priorities and practices are constantly changing, and librarians and disciplinary faculty need to be aware of how to best support students in various areas, including in the creative arts. Many of the ideas expressed in this article came from deep collaboration between different disciplines, and this conversation enhanced mutual (and personal) articulation of our goals and practices in getting students to be creative, curious, communicative, and critical in their dramaturgical and design endeavors. This includes incorporating research in various modes that we have labeled direct and indirect. As shown in the case study provided, student designers should incorporate both modes of research for effective communication. Librarians have a role to play with students in these discussions of research, supporting not just the traditional role of guiding students towards resources about theatrical works, but engaging them in imagining how different aspects of a production can be influenced by research into a variety of topics. The case study illustrates many of the research modes that may be included in dramaturgical and design work, and librarians should examine how they can incorporate them into their instruction. Critical inquiry and skepticism still have a role to play in evaluating information that these students discover, but there is also room for play, for creativity, and for sparking curiosity that can ultimately lead to more effective work.

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